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Great Seals of Iowa

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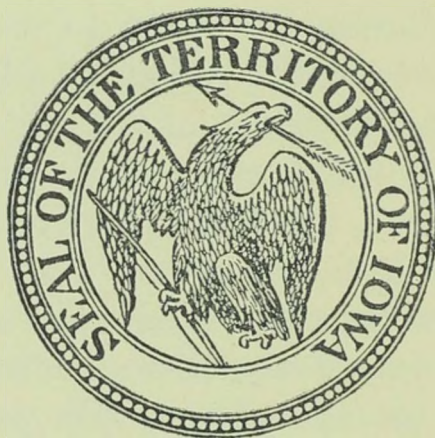
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Great Seals of Iowa

On November 22, 1838, the Council of the First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa passed a resolution requesting the Secretary of the Territory to transmit to the Council "the Great Seal of this Territory, with its impression, for inspection". William B. Conway, the Secretary of the Territory, complied on the following day, submitting the seal together with some impressions on wax and paper. His letter of transmittal described the seal as a device "believed to be simple" and "perfectly expressive of a distinct idea, intimately associated with the history of the delightful country which we have the happiness to inhabit". The eagle, he explained, was "the proud and appropriate emblem of our national power," while the Indian arrow held in its beak and the unstrung bow clutched in its talons depicted an idea "well calculated to make the eye glisten with patriotic pride, and cause the heart to beat high with the pulsations of conscious superiority." At the same time he thought the design presented "a touching appeal to our manly sensibilities, in contemplating the dreary destiny of a declining race;" nor did it fail "to admonish us of the immense importance of improving" the "inheritance which it was their peculiar misfortune to undervalue and neglect."

The communication from the Secretary, together with the seal and its impressions, were referred to the Committee on Territorial Affairs and on November 24th, Warner Lewis reported that in the opinion of the committee the "devices are admirably adapted, and appropriate for the Great Seal of this Territory". Accordingly, on the motion of Stephen Hempstead, the Council adopted the design as the Great Seal of the Territory, and the House of Representatives took the same action on November 26th. Governor Lucas gave his approval on January 4, 1839.



THE GREAT SEAL OF THE TERRITORY

Although the design of the Territorial seal is credited to William B. Conway, the work of engraving was done by William Wagner of York, Pennsylvania. In a subsequent resolution proposing that the seals for the courts in the Territory also be executed by

Mr. Wagner, the Committee on Judiciary of the Council praised his work as having been "executed with elegance and classic taste."

A die of the original Territorial seal has been preserved by the State Historical Society of Iowa. It is one and five-eighths inches in diameter and the word "great" does not appear on it, although the Secretary in his communication and the legislature in its resolution prefixed the word.

Probably the best evidence of the intrinsic artistic merits of the Territorial emblem of authority is to be found in the fact that the general design and motif has served as the model for the seal of the State Historical Society and the seal of the State University of Iowa. The device has also been used extensively upon maps and as a coat of arms. In 1864 an issue of Iowa national bank notes, printed by the Federal government, bore the Great Seal of the Territory.

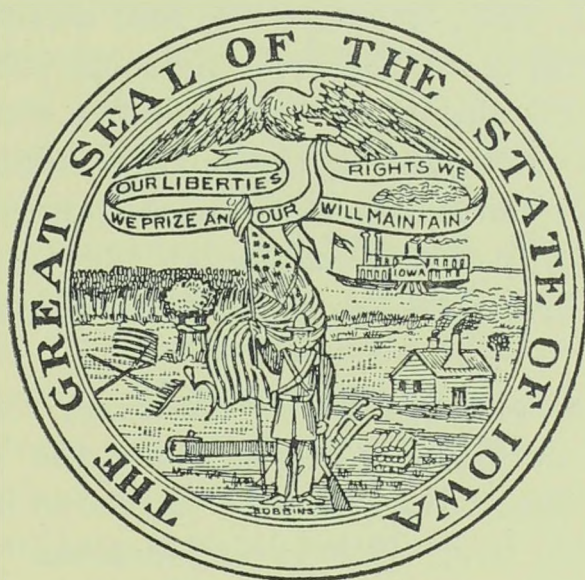
The transition from a Territory to a State involved many changes in administrative details, among which the adoption of a new seal received early consideration. On December 9, 1846, nineteen days before Iowa was actually admitted to the Union, W. E. Leffingwell introduced a resolution in the First General Assembly which was already in session, authorizing the Secretary of State to procure a State seal. This measure was promptly passed by the House of Representatives and referred in the Senate to a select committee composed

of Thomas H. Benton, Jr., Francis Springer, and Philip P. Bradley.

The Senate committee reported a substitute resolution which was passed and approved by Governor Ansel Briggs on February 25, 1847, directing the Secretary of State to procure a Great Seal of the State of Iowa "two inches in diameter" on which should be engraved the following device: "a sheaf and field of standing wheat, with a sickle and other farming utensils, on the left side near the bottom; a lead furnace and pile of pig lead, on the right side; the citizen soldier, with a plow in his rear, supporting the American flag and liberty cap with his right hand, and his gun with his left, in the center and near the bottom; the Mississippi river in the rear of the whole, with the steamer Iowa under way; an eagle near the upper edge, holding in his beak a scroll, with the following inscription upon it: *Our liberties we prize, and our rights we will maintain.*" This design was to be surrounded by the words "The Great Seal of the State of Iowa".

The State Historical Society of Iowa is now in possession of a wooden plate which is labelled the "First Seal of Iowa". It was presented to the Society by John Springer. This seal is rectangular in form, about three and one-fourth inches long by one and one-half inches wide, and made of hard wood reinforced with lead. The design engraved upon it corresponds in its principal details to the description of the seal set forth in the resolution of

the legislature, except that the eagle near the upper edge does not bear in his beak the scroll inscribed with the State motto. It has been suggested that this plate was probably designed for the General Assembly as a model of the proposed official circular seal.



THE FIRST DIE USED FROM 1847 TO 1856

The first die was executed in accordance with the specifications in the authorizing act of 1847, except that the seal was two and three-sixteenths inches in diameter instead of two. Since then the engravers of new dies have made many minor changes in the device, though the description in the law has been substantially followed. In 1915, C. C. Stiles found on official documents in the public archives the im-

pressions of eight different dies, the last of which had been in use since 1888.

Different opinions have been expressed concerning the artistic qualities of the Great Seal of Iowa. T. S. Parvin lamented the fact that so many details were "encompassed within a radius of one inch" and a writer in the *Des Moines Register and Leader* of March 7, 1909, criticized the seal because it symbolized nothing of the true characteristics of the State. In his opinion it "represents a century gone by, a time when the population was strung along a narrow belt bordering the Mississippi river", and does not typify Iowa "as she is" for "no cattle, no hogs, no corn, no prairie, no farm scene" are included.

On the other hand E. W. Eastman, who thought there was nothing "*civilized* about the Territorial seal" and that the eagle was "a coarse ill-begotten thing, keeled over, with great haunches" and looking "for all the world as though it had been pilfered from an old counterfeit Mexican dollar," was enthusiastic in his praise of the State seal. He thought it was symbolic of the modern progressive age of an enlightened people. He liked the display of the implements of industry and commerce, the "bold and fearless" citizen soldier of Iowa, the soaring eagle, and the glorious motto — all emblematic of the "civilization and liberty, and industry, and progress, and valor" of "Iowa as it is and *is to be*".

JACOB VAN EK